

Helping Students See Themselves as Readers

by Melissa Thom

Every single day, middle school students visit my library hoping to find a book to read. I greet each one with a friendly smile and enthusiastically ask if they know what they are looking for or if they are just there to browse. If they reply that they are there to browse, my follow-up question is always, "Would you like any recommendations?" Surprisingly, they often say yes, and we are off and running! I conduct an impromptu interview trying to get to know more about their life as a reader:

- What have they read recently or in the past that they have really enjoyed?
- Do they have a favorite author or series?
- Do they like specific genres?
- Is there anything they know they *don't* like?

These basic questions will often help me point them in the right direction and allow me to offer a few suggestions that they can preview. It is a fine balance between helping them articulate their preferences and being too "pushy," where they feel they have to choose one of my recommendations. Based on this brief interaction, it is often clear whether or not the student has begun to develop a reader's identity.

According to Jennifer Scoggin and Hannah Schneewind in *Trusting Readers: Powerful Practices for Independent Reading*, "Reading identity is not fixed, but fluid and dynamic." It consists of several aspects: "attitude, self-efficacy, habits, book choices, and process. Some of these aspects are visible and some are invisible. Many of these aspects overlap and may be evidenced at the same time. When getting to know students as readers, consider how all the aspects of reading identity are interwoven" (p. 76). You can read more about the aspects and download a reading identity chart at <https://blog.heinemann.com/reading-identity-and-why-it-matters-by-jennifer-scoggin-and-hannah-schneewind>.

All this led me to another consideration. When I reflected on the informal chats I was having with students, I realized I was only interacting with a small percentage of the students who willingly visited the library. What about all the other students who did NOT visit the library and/or did NOT consider themselves readers? How could I help them develop their reading identities?

Connecting with each student individually is ideal but often not possible in the day-to-day bustle of a busy library. Elementary librarians are often locked into a fixed schedule and are pressed for time with curriculum and book checkout; middle school librarians often deal with the opposite issue in that they are on a flexible schedule and depend on classroom teachers to provide time for students to visit the library. In my middle school, most students do not have free time in their day to wander down to the library, leisurely browse the collection, and explore new books to grow their interests. Meanwhile, high school librarians face a population of readers who are so overwhelmed with academics and extracurricular activities that they often don't have time to read anything for the pure pleasure of reading. Therefore, we all need to be creative in our approach to connect with students and "uncover, reinforce, expand, and in some cases reframe all aspects of [their] reading identities" (Scoggin and Schneewind 2021, p. 76).

The following strategies can guide/aid librarians in the development of their students' reading identities:

1. Individual, organic conversations
2. Surveys and self-reflection
3. Modeling and sharing your reader's life
4. Consultations with individual readers
5. Bibliotherapy
6. Celebrating all types of reading

Surveys and Self-Reflection

At the beginning of every school year, I ask the ELA teachers to assign a "Readers Interests and Attitudes" survey (you can make a copy of my template, including links to PDF and Google Forms versions, [here](#)). It has taken five years to successfully have all students complete this survey, which provides me with schoolwide data.

Initially, I viewed the graphs of the responses to each question to get an overview of schoolwide reading identity and practices. For example, the question "Do you think you

are a good reader?" (self-efficacy) helped me better understand how the students perceived themselves as readers. In my school, a little over half of the sixth and seventh graders (58.9%) were confident in their reading ability, leaving 48.9% of students who were unsure or did not consider themselves good readers. As a result of this data, I came up with the plan to offer monthly lessons for ELA classes, in addition to setting up discovery conferences with students who had responded "disagree" and "strongly disagree." I have had success with the sixth-grade lessons but have struggled with getting the seventh-grade classes into the library and found the discovery conferences a challenge to schedule. (To learn more about discovery conferences, read Chapter 4, "Trust Readers to Have a Story," in *Trusting Readers: Powerful Practices for Independent Reading*.)

Another question on the survey, "What kinds of books do you like to read?" (book choice), informed my collection development, future author visits, book tasting themes, and individual reader consultations. One change I made to this question recently was to add "unsure" as an answer option. I realized that the original selection implied that all the students already knew their reading preferences, which may not be the case.

About a month following this survey, I invited students to complete their Reader's Profile. (see the lesson "[Creating a Personalized Reading Profile](#)"). This is a lesson I co-developed with Brittany Leghom, a teacher at my school. In it, students created a personalized reading profile that they could use to help choose books they would enjoy. Using the reader's profile graphic organizer as a guide, students identify books, authors, and series that they have loved, as well as their reading preferences, personal hobbies, and interests. Finally, they draw some conclusions about themselves as readers based on their reflection of past reading experiences. Ideally, the profile can be a tool for the student, the classroom teacher, and the librarian to further develop reading identity.

Modeling

In addition to having students engage in self-reflection about their reading lives and preferences, it is important to model our own reading lives. I have found it very powerful to share how I live a reader's life and explicitly share examples of my own reader identity. For example, when I work with my students on developing reading resolutions every January, I share how important it is to me to set a reading goal for the new year, and I show them the "Reading Challenge" in my Goodreads account. This past year, I also shared that I hadn't met my goal because my 2021 reading life had been very challenging. It's important to be open and honest with students and to model that every reader experiences successes and failures.

After reading Franki Sibberson's blog post, "[Still Learning to Read: 100 Things about Me as a Reader](#)," I was reminded how important it was to not only share my reading life with the students, but to also allow space and time for my students to share their reading lives with one another. Additionally, an effective way to nurture the development of an individual reader's identity is to make them feel like part of a community of readers who work and grow together.

According to Franki, a simple activity "sets the stage for talk about Reader Identity for the whole year." Students (and teachers/librarians) create a list of all the ways they are a reader. Franki begins by sharing her list with the students and then has them make their own lists. When the class shares items from their lists, students are encouraged to add ideas they hear from others to their own lists. This activity would be a great companion mini-lesson to the Reader's Profile activity, and could be revisited and updated throughout the year, since another important message we want to share with our students is: "all readers change and grow throughout their lives" (Sibberson 2016).

Individual Consultations and Discovery Conferences

Getting to know every reader in a school community can be daunting and pose significant challenges. My survey data from the beginning of the year indicated that almost half of the students did not consider themselves readers, therefore I needed to find strategies to connect with these individuals. In his editorial, "[Personal Reading Consultations to Lead Students to Great Books](#)," school librarian Tom Bober outlines a "personal approach for students...[to] meet with students individually, talk with them about their lives as readers, and match them with personalized picks" (book choice). He shared that the idea came to him after he noticed that his "students were not connecting with books...[and his] book talks didn't catch them."

He made the following recommendations for librarians to ensure a successful experience.

- Honor the student's time
- Be honest with the student
- Know the collection
- Remember that the student is ultimately in control
- Following up is key

A parallel idea to Bober's personal consultations is the discovery conference I mentioned earlier. Although this strategy was intended for the classroom teacher, I was interested in finding a way to implement it—or parts of it—as the school librarian when meeting with individual students.

Bibliotherapy

Anita Cellucci's "Using Bibliotherapy to Grow Readers" is an insightful article that addresses the self-efficacy and attitude aspects of reader's identity. She defines bibliotherapy as "a therapeutic approach to supporting mental health using literature," but cautions that librarians using it "as a tool should be well versed in the aspects of mental health as well as acquire some training in relation to youth and mental health."

What resonated most with me were the programs she implemented, in particular "Growth Mindset and Identity as a Reader." It made me think about ways I could (and should) collaborate with the school counselor and psychologist "to help youth understand how reading a book can help them with their life issues or a personal problem." It provided an additional strategy in which to connect with those students who were struggling with their reading identities, as well as this insight:

"The outcomes so far have shown that students need to release their emotional challenges with reading and books before they are willing to proclaim themselves as readers. While bibliotherapy is a vehicle to address readers' emotions, it is also a pathway to help all students see themselves as successful readers" (2020).

Celebrating All Types of Reading

Celebrating all types of reading is foundational to all the other strategies previously listed. If librarians fall short on this, attempts to shape and nurture students' readers' identities will be undermined. In his article, "End Literacy Shaming," school librarian Steven Tetreault writes, "By imposing rules and guidelines for what 'counts' as reading, especially for supposedly 'independent' reading, we create a perfect recipe for destroying interest and motivation." Instead, we should all expand our definitions of what reading can (and should) be.

However, this can prove challenging. For example, consider how/if you promote audiobooks, graphic novels, or nonfiction in your book talks, displays, and recommendations. I admit feeling frustrated when a reader is unwilling to try something new or different from what they have previously read, no matter how enthusiastically I recommend other genres or formats. Tetreault's article reminded me that sometimes, "As educators, we can undermine students' willingness to read when we let our reading prejudices take precedence over encouragement" (2019).

One technique I've implemented is to change the way I engage with the reader who is always choosing the same book/type of book. For example, if a student brings up *Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney for the umpteenth time, I ask whether they are reading the book for the first time or if they are re-reading it as I am helping them check it out. If they say they are re-reading the book, I follow-up with a couple of questions to better understand what aspects of the book they enjoyed. If they say it isn't the first time but they didn't finish it before, I will ask about that experience. This interaction both builds trust with the reader by showing interest in their choice instead of disapproval and provides information for future read-alike suggestions.

Always remind yourself that "by building students' sense of agency, educators can empower them to feel like they are actual readers. Give readers choices, don't criticize, and help students find what works for them. Encourage abandonment of books that aren't working, rather than making students feel like failures for not completing something they started" (Tetreault 2019).

In addition to helping students develop a sense of agency, librarians can also play an important role by advocating for a student's reading choice with teachers and families. What do you do if a parent/caretaker doesn't approve or support their child's reading choices? This can be a slippery slope to navigate, but Tom Bober's personal consultations "provide opportunities to talk to adults as well...about the benefits of graphic novels or certain types of nonfiction while also agreeing to see if the student and [he] can find a bridge of interest into another format or type of reading" (Bober 2018).

Conclusion

Although the goal of connecting with each of our readers is daunting, it is important because "reading identity and reading engagement have a reciprocal relationship" (Scoggin and Schneewind 2021, p. 78). There are many ways librarians can help nurture the reading identities of students. I encourage you to reflect on what strategies you are already using to learn more about who your students are as readers and then select one of the strategies shared above to add to your toolbox. Sometimes we make the mistake of trying to do everything at once and being everything to everybody in our buildings, but I have found that if we step back and slow down a little, setting smaller goals, that doing less can often lead to better, more successful results.

Begin by reflecting on the following questions:

- What does reader's identity mean to you—what comes to mind?
- Do you identify as a reader? Why? How?
- What path have you followed to get to the reader's identity you currently have?
- What are some characteristics of your reading life? Make a list of all the things that make you a reader.

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